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Soviet navy's Pacific buildup

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It is extraordinary how little public attention has focused on one of the major geopolitical phenomena of the century: the extraordinary growth of the Soviet navy in the Pacific.

The Pacific Ocean, which President Reagan has just overflowed, is no longer *mare nostrum* ("our sea"), as it was after the defeat of the Japanese navy in 1945.

Public and media inattention to so historic an event is difficult to explain. After all, from World War II to the present, our politico-military problems in the misnamed Pacific area have been far greater and more costly in human life — Mao's China, the Korean war and Chinese entry, Vietnam, North Korea, Kampuchea, the Philippines — than in the Atlantic, where a relative peace has reigned on land and sea for more than four decades.

And it is also in the Pacific area that American business has found important market economy trading partners whose trade turnover with the United States is said to exceed that between the United States and the European Community.

The world's second-largest economy, Japan, living under a Soviet nuclear-missile threat, remains a staunch U.S. ally despite intensive Soviet "active measures" aimed at destabilizing that country and establishing a neutralist, non-aligned Japan.

While at the highest levels of the U.S. Navy there is confidence that in a U.S.-Soviet showdown the United States would prevail, there is no certainty that a U.S.S.R. which in 20 years has doubled the size of its Pacific surface and air fleet, and which has thereby become a realistic threat to the ASEAN countries, would allow itself to remain permanently in a position of qualitative inferiority to the U.S. Navy. Experts on Soviet naval developments have pointed out that not only is the number of Soviet attack submarines increasing but that their quality is improving.

In addition, the Soviets possess the world's largest and most sophisticated inventory of naval mines, while U.S. Pacific fleet's mine countermeasures today would be insufficient to deal adequately with even a limited Soviet mining effort.

According to Professor Alvin H. Bernstein, chairman of the Department of Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College, the buildup of Soviet

forces in the Asia-Pacific region "shows no sign of abating."

Linked with the Soviet buildup is an increase in the number of SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the Far East (one-third of the total Soviet force) and the likely introduction of the longer-range land mobile SS-X-25, which could threaten Australia. Last November, three new Soviet warships entered the Pacific Fleet — a nuclear-powered guided-missile cruiser, the *Frunze*, and two guided-missile destroyers — as an additional Soviet surface action group.

Writing in the spring issue of *The National Interest*, Mr. Bernstein says: "The quality of Soviet air and naval forces in the East can be expected to improve as well with the introduction of new tactical and strategic aircraft possessing more capable systems ... and quieter, more operationally sophisticated submarines."

Mr. Bernstein does not envision any outbreak of hostilities in the Pacific. Rather he says Soviet develop-

ments in the Pacific "add up to an exercise in coercive diplomacy typical of a power that relies on long-term effects of fear to achieve its ends, the most immediate of which is probably to intimidate the regional powers into distancing themselves from the United States."

A more immediate target of Soviet military and naval exercises is Communist China, which recently observed a Soviet amphibious exercise only 100 miles from the Chinese border. The U.S.S.R. is concerned about Chinese naval operations, particularly in submarine warfare training.

The most immediately serious problem for the U.S. Navy is Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Base, described as the largest U.S. military centers outside U.S. territory. Mr. Bernstein cites a recent CIA estimate that within three years the Communist New People's Army, which seeks U.S. ouster from these bases, will equal in numbers the Philippine military.

As presently constituted, the Philippine army is "not capable of de-

feating the insurgents," let alone of protecting the U.S. bases from unconventional attack. The base perimeters are supposed to be patrolled by the Philippine military, but crucial deficiencies in that coverage were exposed in September 1985 by a U.S. Senate subcommittee.

A second "Pearl Harbor," that is, a Soviet pre-emptive bombing from the Soviet-controlled Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang of Subic and Clark (a mere two hours' flying time away) could wipe out logistical support for the 7th Fleet and the 13th Air Force.

Things are getting sticky in the Pacific. The U.S.S.R. grows stronger in the area with each passing day, not only militarily but also politically, especially among the archipelagic island minstates in the South Pacific.

It's time for America to wake up.

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